

Still a Bridge Too Far

Pakistan's Connectivity with Central Asian Republics

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Pakistan's connectivity with Central Asian Republics; Still a bridge too far

Abstract

Connectivity with other civilisations is the corner stone of Social Contract. Collapse of USSR marked the demise of Great Game and Central Asian Republics (CARs) comprising of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan comprising an area of 4 million square Kilometres and having a population of 72 Million; all took birth at end 1992. Pakistan has a strong political, historical, religious and cultural link with these CARs stretching back to last millennium. A feeling of euphoria and nostalgia of Silk Route was experienced in Pakistan during the early days of these CARs independence. However after thirty years, the connectivity between Pakistan and these republics is still a bridge too far. This essay, adopts 'Civilisation's clashes and interactions' as the philosophical framework and 'Traditional Social Theory' framework in which people to people connectivity is the Scarlet Thread, it looks into the expectations, reality and future prospects between Pakistan and CARs. Recommending, establishing an Air Bridge as immediate, and priority of establishing railways link of Gwadar with Quetta-Zahedan track; thereby overcoming the main hurdle of Afghanistan.

Introduction ' Geographical Pivot of History'

Central Asia etymologically was known by Greeks as Jaxarates, Arabs called it Mawar-un-nahar and Russians termed it as Shredene Asia.¹ In 1904 during a lecture, it was hypothesised as the Geographical Pivot of History.² Presently it encompasses Kazakhstan in north, Sinkiang(Eastern Turkestan) in east along with Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyz Republic) and Tajikistan with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in centre and south (Five CARs).³ Five Central Asian Republics have varying population and area, Kazakhstan having the largest area and borders China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The country is rich with oil and despite being the seventh largest country in the world in terms of area it has one of the lowest population density. Tajikistan is the smallest republic in terms of area among all five,

¹ Ahmad Hassan Dani *New Light on Central Asia* Lahore; Sang Meel, 1996. P36. Mawar-un- nahar means 'That which is beyond the river. Shredne Asia means Middle Asia

² Harold John Mackinder in his 1904 article described it as Geographical Pivot of History. https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20131016_MackinderTheGeographicalJournal.pdf

³ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia> also see World Bank which describes only CARs as Central Asia. <https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/central-asia/Central-Asia-brochure-Nov-2013-en.pdf>

⁴Kyrgyzstan is also a small country, Turkmenistan in the south is among the rich republics by virtue of its gas fields, Uzbekistan among all is a balance country with a population of 35 million, largest among all five republics. However despite variation in resources, population the CARs have one very strong bond and that is Religion of Islam.

Geography plays an important role as all CARs are landlocked, having mountainous terrain, water is scarce and so is land for cultivation. Population is mainly nomadic in nature and built around tribes and clans. 60% of CARs area is desert; overall the region covers an area of 1.5 million square miles with a population of 72 Million. In other words CARs are five times more in area as compared to Pakistan; and Pakistan population is three times more than them.

In 1530, Babur also from Fergana invaded India and established the Mughul Empire which lasted till 1857 when British took over the reins. Thus India in a sense was being ruled by the Central Asia. Islam in Subcontinent also absorbed Central Asian features of Islam having Sufism as a distinct entity; in all major cities of Pakistan there are tombs of saints with majority and more influential being from Central Asia.

From 16th Century onwards the Russians started making advances into Central Asia; so did China and by 1880s the Chinese had occupied the Sinkiang and Russians had the territory that includes all off the present CARs. These Republics were later integrated into USSR in 1920s and in due time given the status of autonomous regions. The interstate boundaries were also formulated in this period. British India and Russia were engaged in a covert-overt strategy to control Central Asia in what is known as Great Game. In December 1991, as USSR collapsed, the CARs declared their independence, thus it is a unique phenomenon in modern era that no less than five countries declared independence from one country and that too without any armed or political struggle.

Pakistan and Central Asia 1991-2001

People of Pakistan erupted in joy over these developments, in addition to the independence of CARs the Taliban in Afghanistan which were backed by Pakistan also took control of Kabul; thus from one popular perspective the entire region came under Pakistan sphere of influence. Islamic ties and bond with CARs and Afghanistan were a source of optimism among the policy makers in Pakistan, who to a great extent are always apprehensive of India and as such this new development afforded a strategic depth.⁵ Moreover an economic honeymoon was also expected with these strategic gains and opportunities. Pakistan did extended credit facility of US\$10 Million to each of the CARs.⁶ Late Professor Ahmad Hassan Dani was the driving force, he through his books, articles,

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Tajikistan <https://mfa.tj/en/main/foreign-policy/territorial-and-border-issues>

⁵ General Mirza Aslam Beg . “Foreword.” In *Central Asia, regional cooperation for peace and development*, ed.S.Rahman (Islamabad; Friends,1996).

⁶ Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs official website. <http://mofa.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/BSKI-31-Standardization-and-Updation-of-websiote-and-web-portal-1-1.pdf>

television and talks brought into limelight the historical legacy of Indus Civilisation with CARs and as such created a deep interest among the people .

Pakistan entered into various protocols, agreements with CARs, signing no less than 89 of these between 1991-2000. In last two decades the number of such diplomatic agreements now totals 276.⁷ A military deal to purchase 12 MI-17 helicopters from Kazakhstan was also finalised and these helicopters were ferried across Turkmenistan and Iran to Pakistan in February 1994 and in March 1995; making it the first military deal with CARs. The very first interaction of Pakistani military officers and soldiers with fellow Muslims of CARs was good. ‘ *We stayed for well over two months for our training, we were staying in a hotel. We interacted with local population, language was a barrier as none of the local spoke English. The locals are very hospitable. We flew across the Central Asia and at places we found the administration very strict in abiding by the rules*’.⁸

Pakistan was keen to develop its relations and establish connectivity with the CARs, embassies were established in all capitals and PIA started operating regular commercial flights to Dushanbe, Tashkent, Ashgabat. Bishkek. Aircraft were also leased from Uzbekistan to operate in Pakistan. Bazars of Rawalpindi were soon filled with tourists from these CARs. Islamabad International Airport (Benazir Bhutto Airport) became the hub for the CARs intending to perform Umrah or Haj or to proceed to anywhere in the world. The very first road trade convoy comprising of forty odd Mercedes trucks of National Logistics Cell (NLC) did made a venture in 1993 to reach Turkmenistan.⁹ Major General (retired) Naseer Ullah Babar then Interior Minister was the brain behind this. Convoy was stopped many a times by the warring militia in Afghanistan but no harm was done to own people; such was the air of trust between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban. All countries of CARs less Tajikistan underwent peaceful transition of independence; Tajikistan was embroiled in an ethnic civil war which compelled Russian troops to remain stationed in republic as late as 2005.¹⁰

In Pakistan a public relation campaign was undertaken to educate the masses on the importance of CARs, Pakistan had initiated the motorway project between Lahore and Islamabad and it was billed as a link to CARs; this narrative was adopted in order to counter opposition harp of opulence expenditures. *Pakistan has established bilateral investment treaties with all CARs, with Kazakhstan in 2003, Kyrgyz Republic in August 1995, Tajikistan in May 2004, Turkmenistan in October 1994, and Uzbekistan in August 1992.*

Moreover it was Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov who gave the proposal of ‘6 Plus Two’ to resolve issue in Afghanistan in 1998; Thus Pakistan and CARs are engaged

⁷ The Foreign Office of Pakistan has a complete list of such agreements and after going through the data of each country the final figure has been calculated by the author, it is updated till September 2019. Highest agreements has been signed with Uzbekistan (69) followed by Tajikistan (64) Turkmenistan (47), Kazakhstan (39) and 27 with Kyrgyz republic.

⁸ Lieutenant Colonel retired Masood Akhtar was part of this team, interviewed him on 2 December 2020.

⁹ Grare, F. (1998). ‘Pakistan And Central Asia: Strategic consideration versus Economic opportunities. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 2(4), 106-122. Retrieved December 13, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45064596>

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Tajikistan.

politically to resolve regional issues. Pakistan and CARs are also members of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.¹¹

Post 9/11 , Pakistan-CARs Connectivity.

9/11 came as a shock to the world; Pakistan already had undergone tremors of conflict with India over Kargil in 1998 and the subsequent military coup. The 9/11 event, once again brought world focus on Afghanistan and resultantly once again foreign forces , this time USA and NATO allies invaded it. Pakistan found itself in a tight rope but also in limelight and as such in immediate coming years it played a key and active role in the regional politics of Central Asia; Pakistan became the geographical pivot of the world in War on Terror. This brought the world focus on the CARs as well, thus Pakistan's relations and connectivity with the region was more focused on defence, anti-terrorism, to crush fundamentalist mind set. Head of States from Pakistan and CARs interacted, with President Musharraf visiting Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in May 2006. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan Presidents also visiting Islamabad between 2003-2006.

Pakistan provides the natural link between the SCO states to connect the Eurasian heartland with the Arabian Sea and South Asia ... We offer the critical overland routes and connectivity for mutually beneficial trade and energy transactions intra-regionally President General Pervez Musharraf June 15, 2006.¹²

Trans Asia Railway network was signed in November 2006, now having 22 countries including Pakistan, India, China, Iran, and CARs as signatory. In envisioned a railway line over 117, 500 Kilometres . A much needed treaty of the time. ¹³

One Belt One Road- China Pakistan Economic Corridor

President Xi Jinping of China during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013 announced ‘Belt, Road Initiative’ (BRI). A project that seeks to foster improved connectivity between China and the rest of Asia, the Middle East and on to Africa and Europe. The initiative encompasses more than 65 countries, representing over 62 percent of the world's population. The OBOR was an alternate and parallel initiative by the China to have an exclusive right over the old Silk Route passing through CARs. Pakistan also joined the project and being a strategic ally of China , a China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched in 2015. Gwadar deep sea port is the very heart of this CPEC. The CPEC envisage trade route of road and railways stretching from Sinkiang to Gwadar. The geopolitical and geostrategic environment has undergone a paradigm shift by virtue of BRI. From Pakistan perspective the connectivity with CARs which has been slow due to paucity of funds got the required impetus. The Chinese OBORI and CPEC are the Scarlet Thread of this optimism. In last

¹¹ http://eng.sectsco.org/about_sco/. Pakistan and India were given full membership in 2017.

¹² Meena Singh Roy in Indian Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses https://idsa.in/strategicanalysis/PakistansStrategiesinCentralAsia_msroy_1006

¹³ https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtsg_no=XI-C-5&chapter=11&clang=en
Also see <https://www.unescap.org/our-work/transport/trans-asian-railway>

decade the China has become the major player in the region by virtue of its initiative to revive Silk Route and thereby enhancing not only its own economy but also that of other countries in the region. As the peace settlement in Afghanistan seems to be on the horizon the future, certainly looks bright and optimistic for Pakistan and CARs in having better connectivity.

*In 2018, all five CARs adopted a resolution on regional cooperation in the UN General Assembly. On the initiative of Uzbekistan's president, heads of five CARs met in Astana in 2018 after a break of 13 long years. In November 2019, the Summit of CARs was held in Tashkent and this year in Bishkek.*¹⁴

Regional connectivity is also the central piece of Pakistan future vision 2025¹⁵. However at present the connectivity is still a bridge too far, there is now only one flight being operated from Pakistan to CARs thrice a week from Lahore and that too by Uzbekistan Airways; PIA is not operating any flight to any city in Central Asia. There is no bus service to CARs from Pakistan although a bus service does operate between Peshawar and Kabul on irregular basis. The trucks laden with fruits and vegetables are still plying and in Peshawar Fruit and Vegetable market, it is normal to see, onions coming from Kazakhstan. Thus a limited and small scale trade is being carried, mostly on small trucks. The pattern is that Pakistani goods are being transported from Pakistan on Afghan trucks, these Afghan Trucks are off loaded within Afghanistan and then goods are transported to various cities of Central Asia. Only recently, Uzbekistan has allowed Pakistani trucks to enter their territory and as such it comes as a major breakthrough in regional trade.

There are two main customs posts in Pakistan which allows road movement for CARs, one at Torkham near Peshawar and other at Chaman near Quetta. Few other crossing points have been made operational most notable being the Ghulam Khan in North Waziristan. This is also linked with the main Motorway (M-1). Pakistan at present has a good network of Motorways which links Torkham to main highway artery leading to Gwadar sea port. A new international airport at Islamabad has also been commissioned in 2019, the most modern airport in the region. However it is the dilapidated state of Pakistan railways which is the main concern as our rail network is still outdated, lacks dual tracks and modern rail cargo system.

Karakorum Highway the sole artery that connects Pakistan with China is still under upgradation and as such heavy cargo containers cannot utilise it safely; moreover in winter the lone road link is suspended due to heavy snow (Khunjerab Pass is 16000 feet). Thus it is an enigma as the Gwadar Port itself is operational yet there is no rail link with Gwadar; the

¹⁴ <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/744238-car-regionalism-and-pakistan> The News Islamabad, dated 16 November 2020.

¹⁵ Saima Parveen, Syed Akhtar "China Pakistan Economic Corridor: Interdependence to Regional Integration" *Central Asia Journal* No.85, Winter 2019. [http://journals.uop.edu.pk/papers/04%20Syed%20Akhtar%20Ali%20Shah%20&%20Saima%20Parveen%20\(57-78\).p](http://journals.uop.edu.pk/papers/04%20Syed%20Akhtar%20Ali%20Shah%20&%20Saima%20Parveen%20(57-78).p)

trade volume desire, requires rail for an economical transportation of goods from and to CARs.

Culturally, the people of Pakistan and those in CARs are experiencing a gap emerging them. In Pakistan, very few students of even Masters level can name all republics and their capitals, such is the state of affairs. There is no projection of CARs culture on our television or radio. Unfortunately, Pakistan and CARs have no common sports or games to play. Afghanistan on the other hand by virtue of Cricket is now more culturally integrated with South Asia and other cricket playing nations of the world including England, Australia and South Africa.

CARs, are good in sports, Uzbekistan won 15 medals including 11 gold in 2016 Olympics, whereas Pakistan won none and as a matter of fact the tally of Uzbekistan gold medals is more than the combined gold medals of Pakistan-India-Bangladesh in last thirty years.

Afghanistan and India; Stumbling Blocks

The Region has historical linkage and animosity which despite the passage of time has increased. Pakistan have a dispute with India over Kashmir and this lone issue is the cause of first two wars between these two countries in 1948 and in 1965 and also they almost reached the full scale war over Kargil in 1998. India has cordial relationship with Afghanistan and as such any Pakistani effort to have connectivity with Central Asia through Afghanistan is invariably link with the relationship of Pakistan and India. There is no denying the fact that India, now an economic giant in the region wants an access to Afghanistan and Central Asia for trade; Pakistan denies this to India on the condition of resolving Kashmir issue. In return Afghanistan denies Pakistan an access to Central Asia unless Pakistan allows India to have road link trade with Kabul. Kashmir issue may take another decades before any settlement can be agreed and till then as long as Kabul enjoys friendly relationships with India, Pakistan will be denied the desired access and connectivity with Central Asia.¹⁶

Recommendations

Establishing Silk Air Bridge

Afghanistan is an unpredictable neighbour, the level of mistrust among people has reached a level that will take few years to become friendly. Pakistan should not wait for situation to improve in Afghanistan rather it should explore the alternatives, which as highlighted earlier will take few more years before CPEC and OBOR starts functioning. Air Corridor with CARs is an instant and safe way to establish connectivity with CARs.

Pakistan and Central Asian Republics both have quite a number of international airports which are good enough to absorb this aerial connectivity. There is no doubt that

¹⁶ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/12/india-iran-uzbekistan-pursue-central-asian-connectivity/>. \Afghanistan peace process must preserve gains of past 20 years, says PM Modi - India news - Hindustan Times. Download Dec 2020

aircraft cannot match a railway connection in terms of economy and payload; yet on the other hand it is the speed which offset this disadvantage.

PIA which is at the time is in dire straits because of its flight suspensions to USA and Europe should concentrate on CARs for cargo operations. It is worth highlighting that PIA in first week of December 2020 has announced to start daily cargo flights to China, thus similar flights should also be operated for CARs. Flights to CARs should also be initiated from Peshawar and Quetta apart from Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. Small aircraft (Fokker / ATR) should also operate from Chitral and Gilgit for Tajikistan as flight time from these two Pakistani cities for Tajikistan is less than an hour. Even Sialkot, Faisalabad, Miranshah, Zhob, Gwadar, Multan, Sukkur should also be considered for passenger and cargo flights to CARs cities.

Silk Railways

It is almost a century and half ago that railways were introduced by British and Russian in present day Pakistan and CARs and despite passage of years these railways are still operating. In Pakistan, despite the fact that some of the most amazing piece of railway engineering were created during the British era, however unfortunately the railways remained neglected since independence; resultantly the frontier railway tracks are now almost vanished. Railways are the most economical way of heavy trade especially when it involves transportation of goods to and from any port. Gwadar Port is among the world deep sea ports and perhaps more than any other port in the world requires this railway link. CPEC fully recognised this and envisioned a one of its kind. marvel of railway engineering linking port with Kashgar (China) through the high, rugged Himalayas, Karakorum and Hindukush mountain ranges. This rail miracle, will take decades to become functional and this raises dissonance, as transporting heavy port tonnage through trucks; theoretically is a road safety catastrophe especially on Karakorum Highway.

In the CPEC, there is no vision and provision of linking by railways of Gwadar Port with CARs; through the Iran onwards to Trans Caspian Railways in CARs. Gwadar Port thus rationally must be linked with Quetta-Zahedan Railways. It must be kept in mind that historically the Silk Road was not just about caravans moving from China across Pamirs to Roman Empire but Indus Civilisation also used southern corridor of Multan- Balochistan- Persia onwards to Mediterranean. By linking Gwadar Port with the Quetta-Zahedan, an alternate route will be available for our industry to trade with CARs bypassing Afghanistan and also it will be more economical in terms of shorter mileage.

Cultural Connectivity

There is a dire and urgent need to catalyse the existing bond with CARs through the cultural exhibitions, book fairs, movies and sports. Pakistan Television must screen shows on CARs, sports festivals and tournaments must be exchanged; at Shandur Polo Tournament the CARs should also be invited. Postal stamps, naming of roads after CARs personalities should be given coverage in newspapers and social media.

Conclusion

Pakistan's connectivity with CARs despite being slow in the past has taken a new leaf with the CPEC and OBOR. The region is now witnessing a greater interaction among the CARs and superpowers; China, Russia and USA all are vying to deny each other an exclusive monopoly over the region. Russia by virtue of his historical link is not willing to let CARs go out of his sphere of interest, China is also making his claim more attractive and realist by virtue of OBOR. USA is keeping its presence in the region through capital and establishing connectivity.

Pakistan geographically, historically, culturally enjoys a very special place in the region. Pakistan has been the very exception in the region to maintain good relationship with the super powers in the past, present and in future this role will become even more important for the economic growth of Pakistan. Gwadar seaport is the heart and life line of CPEC, more than anything else it is the security environment in Balochistan which is a matter of concern, thus it will be more appropriate to start projects of connectivity in south on priority and linking Gwadar with Quetta- Zahedan railway line should be the top priority.

Cultural bonds with CARs must be strengthened and people to people contact should be amplified through sports and cultural activities. Exchange of scholars, students and intellectuals needs an patronage.

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